

# WeWork and ex-CEO Neumann accused of pregnancy discrimination by former employee

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 [washingtonpost.com/business/2019/11/01/wework-ex-ceo-neumann-accused-pregnancy-discrimination-by-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/11/01/wework-ex-ceo-neumann-accused-pregnancy-discrimination-by-)

By Taylor Telford

A former employee has accused WeWork and ousted chief executive Adam Neumann of pregnancy discrimination, alleging she was publicly and privately demeaned, demoted and eventually fired because of her pregnancies. The complaint is the latest to emerge about the company's culture under Neumann's leadership.

Medina Bardhi, who served as Neumann's chief of staff, alleges that female employees were subjected to "sexually offensive conduct," disparaged for taking maternity leave and often paid significantly less than their male counterparts, according to [a complaint](#) filed Thursday with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Bardhi had two children during her more than five years at WeWork, and claims Neumann referred to maternity leave as "retirement" and "vacation," according to the complaint.

She alleges she was demoted after both pregnancies — and replaced by men at higher wages — but given no instruction about her new responsibilities.

"During and after both leaves, Ms. Bardhi paid the price in her position and earning power at the Company, by having her role drastically and materially reduced, being demoted, and having male employees elevated over and replacing her," the complaint states.

WeWork faces a number of lawsuits over age, gender and pay discrimination from multiple women, including a former executive. Once valued at as much as \$47 billion, the co-working company has had a stunning fall from grace after postponing its IPO in September amid troubling reports about Neumann's behavior and questions about the company's true worth. WeWork was on the brink of running out of money before it secured a \$9.5 billion bailout from SoftBank. Neumann exited the company almost entirely last month, his departure sweetened by \$1.7 billion in cash and credit.

"WeWork intends to vigorously defend itself against this claim," the company said of Bardhi's complaint in a statement emailed to The Post. "We have zero tolerance for discrimination of any kind. We are committed to moving the company forward and building a company and culture that our employees can be proud of."

A personal spokesperson for Neumann did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

According to Bardhi's complaint, the discrimination began at her October 2013 job interview, when Neumann "unlawfully and intrusively" asked when she was going to get married and become pregnant — a question he routinely asked female candidates, the complaint says. When she became pregnant in March 2016, the complaint says, she was "scared" to disclose it but felt obligated to explain why she couldn't accompany Neumann on business travels, "due to his penchant for bringing marijuana on chartered flights and smoking it throughout the flight." She did not want to expose her unborn child to the smoke.

The complaint also alleges that Jennifer Berrent, the chief operating officer, repeatedly referred to Bardhi's pregnancy and impending maternity leave as a "problem" that had to "be fixed." Two months after Neumann learned of Bardhi's pregnancy, he told her a search for her replacement had begun.

"It was clear that WeWork was not just looking for temporary coverage, but a permanent replacement, in direct response to her pregnancy," the complaint states.

The male employee who replaced Bardhi after the first pregnancy was offered \$400,000 a year, plus a \$175,000 signing bonus, the complaint says, while she earned \$150,000. Though she was eventually reinstated, the sequence repeated itself after she became pregnant again in February: She was replaced by a male hire and given no information about her duties upon her return. She was demoted and not given any meaningful work for months, the complaint states.

Bardhi says she was fired in early October, six months after giving birth and days after Neumann was ousted following the company's initial public offering flub. She had worked with Neumann since 2005, at his previous company, Egg Baby. She was terminated over the phone, and told there was no longer a role for her after Neumann's departure, although she had not worked closely with Neumann for months.

"Our hope is that this class action complaint will send a loud and clear message to WeWork and other start-ups that pregnant women cannot be forced out of their jobs, that women must be paid fairly and afforded equal opportunities, and that you cannot retaliate against any person who voices a complaint of discrimination," Bardhi's attorney, Douglas Wigdor, said in a statement.

The EEOC will investigate Bardhi's allegations of discrimination. If the agency finds that discrimination occurred, Bardhi and WeWork will be invited to deal with the charge through a conciliation process with the EEOC. If it isn't resolved through conciliation, the EEOC can file a federal lawsuit; if the EEOC decides not to litigate, it would give Bardhi the right to sue.